

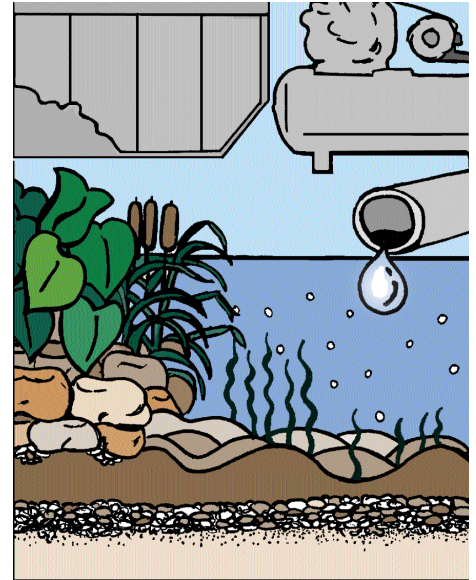
Individual Wastewater Systems

Maintenance

All individual wastewater systems will require some form of maintenance. Some systems will require more upkeep than others, but no system is totally maintenance free. Even a septic tank and drainfield requires regular upkeep.

The length of life and dependability of a wastewater system depends on how the homeowner maintains the system.

One of the worst mistakes a homeowner can make regarding an individual wastewater system is to forget that it's there. The homeowner needs to keep in mind that a wastewater system is designed and installed to meet the normal wastewater disposal needs of a certain size home and soil conditions on the site.



Pumping

There's one important thing most homeowners neglect to do: have the septic tank or treatment plant pumped out periodically. Tanks should be pumped out regularly to prevent clogging, objectionable odor and color of the discharge.

All wastewater contains solids which settle to the bottom of the tank. While this is a normal process and prevents the solids from being discharged from the tank, over time the solids will fill the tank. When this happens, solids begin to leave the tank and may clog the drainfield or may cause the discharge to be dark colored and/or have a bad odor.

To avoid these problems homeowners should establish and maintain a pump-out schedule for their tank. The schedule will be determined by how much organic material is loaded into the system.

A widely accepted general rule is to have the tank pumped out every three to five years. The cost of this service is reasonable, and there are many contractors available to check the solids level in a tank to determine if it needs to be pumped out.

Overloading a system

Homeowners should avoid making excessive demands on the system's capacity. Several loads of laundry in a day, extremely long showers, or whirlpool tubs will put an extra strain on a wastewater system. Avoid unnecessary flushing of toilets, and repair leaky faucets.

Storm water or runoff from roofs should never be placed in a wastewater system. Sending wastewater to the tank too fast can cause solid materials to pass into the drainfield without undergoing the gradual anaerobic digestion expected to take place in the tank. Using the system at or below its design capacity will help to ensure against failure.

Chlorination and Surface Discharge

Any wastewater system with a surface discharge — whether it is discharged or sprayed on the surface of the ground — must be chlorinated before it's discharged. In fact, discharge systems should not be allowed to operate without chlorine. Chlorination is done in a contact chamber. The chlorine tablets in the chlorinator must be replenished regularly.

Chlorine tablets designed for swimming pools shouldn't be used as they have a more stable form of chlorine that does not dissipate rapidly into the air. This doesn't mean that swimming pool tablets dissolve slower or last longer. It only means that once dissolved, chlorine from swimming pool tablets will remain longer in the water. This is *not* good for wastewater systems. Only chlorine tablets labeled for use in wastewater systems should be used.

Motors

The motors on aerobic treatment plants should be checked regularly to determine if they are functioning. All treatment plants have a warning device to indicate when there is a malfunction of the system. It may be necessary to check at the treatment plant to determine if the motor is functioning. If a homeowner is not certain that the motor is operating, he should contact the installer of the system.

Plant Rock Filters, Plants

Plant rock filters may require thinning of plants at some time. This will depend upon the type of plants used in the system. Some plants multiply rapidly and the root mass may clog the rock filter.

The quality of wastewater, as well as the quantity, has a profound effect on the performance of wastewater systems. Fats or grease should never be poured down a drain, as they can enter the drainfield and seal it off or clog the plumbing between the house and tank. Garbage disposals add a large quantity of organic material to tanks and require that they be pumped more often. They should be used only in moderation on homes with individual wastewater systems.

Individual wastewater disposal systems are intended for the disposal of human wastes and the reasonable amount of wash water generated by a home. Bleaches, disinfectants, and household cleaners should be used only in moderation.

Never put hazardous or toxic substances such as herbicides, insecticides, paints, varnishes, oils, or poisons into a wastewater system.

Other materials not suited for onsite wastewater disposal systems include coffee grounds, cigarette butts, disposable diapers, sanitary napkins, facial tissues, plastics, or paper towels. Introduction of these items into the tank will require more frequent pumping of the tank and could increase the risk of damaging the system.

For more information about maintaining your individual wastewater disposal system, contact your county public health environmentalist.



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